60p

THE Unexplained

MYSTERIES OF MIND SPACE & TIME

122

The Priddy Project
Sinister sounds at Enfield
Amityville-the truth
The Watseka wonder
Psychic Photo File

Aus & NZ$1.75 SAR1.75 IR75p US$1.50

THE Unexplained
MYSTERIES OF MIND SPACE & TIME

Published weekly by Orbis Publishing Limited
Orbis House, 20/22 Bedfordbury, London WC2N 4BT

Volume 11 Issue 122

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Can mathematics predict life's turning points? We begin a fascinating discussion of the controversial **Catastrophe theory**. Behind the complex mysteries that surround Rennes-le-Château lies the shadowy presence of a secret society that, it is said, continues to this day. We investigate the **Prieuré de Sion**. In the late 19th century readers of British 'penny dreadfuls' were thrilled to discover that the executioner's trapdoor failed to work three times for the same felon; moreover, condemned man and executioner had the same dream . . . Find out more in **John 'Babbacombe' Lee**. In **Fact follows fiction** we look at the uncanny tendency of life to follow art – as actresses relive the tragedies they have acted, and fictional horror stories come true. And in **Enfield poltergeist** one of the major critics of the case speaks out.
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Subscription Rates
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An underground movement

The five dowsers of the Priddy Project worked under the glare of television cameras – to locate pot-holers in the deep caves and tunnels of Somerset. COLIN GODMAN and LINDSAY ST CLAIRE reveal the amazing results

JAMES RANDI, the American conjurer, claims to have spent the years since the early 1950s on a fruitless search for paranormal abilities despite his offer of $10,000 for a satisfactory demonstration. He reports a dismal response from psychics of all kinds, including dowsers. In fact, since his aggressive confrontation of Uri Geller in 1973 (see page 669), Randi has been embarrassing psychical researchers all over the world.

In July 1980 Randi carried out a test of dowsers at Sydney in Australia. He buried 10 plastic water pipes, some empty and some with water, 20 inches (50 centimetres) deep in a ploughed field. The dowsers were prevented from seeing this operation and from knowing which of the 10 pipes were carrying water. Randi felt confident that trickery would be out of the question. He also hid brass and gold in one of 10 cardboard boxes scattered over the field.

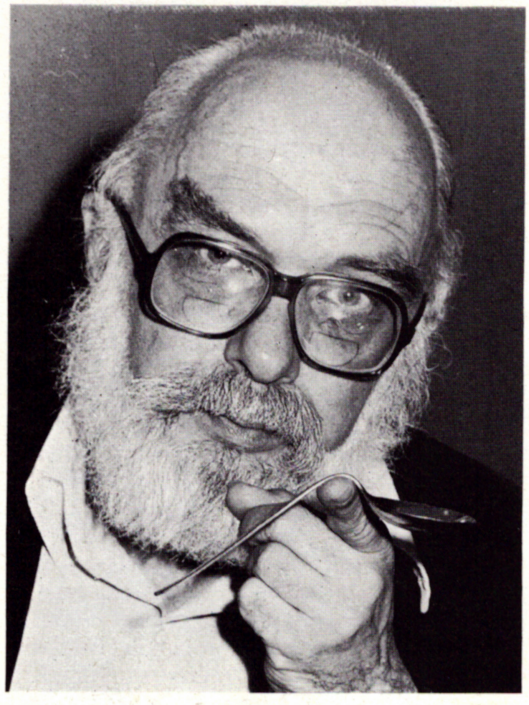
The dowsers faced a test in which anyone could expect a one in 10 success rate purely by chance. They hoped to make a significant improvement upon the chance results, but they were disappointed. In 50 runs over the pipes they were correct on 11 occasions, which was better than chance, but they managed to detect the box containing the metal only four times in 61 trials – a rate of only one in 15.

The dowsers had claimed in advance that they would achieve a success rate of 85 to 100 per cent, and Randi ruled that they had failed on their own terms. He further refused to accept that the above-chance results in the water divining test were evidence of genuine phenomena. The cheque for $10,000 did not change hands.

Randi's Australian test illustrates the problem of mounting a demonstration of dowsing. Eight years earlier, in 1972, the authors took part in a BBC Television programme on the subject. Dramatic results were hoped for even though previous television tests were anything but conclusive, particularly where dowsers were challenged to locate objects hidden by the television team.

Failures were attributed to 'stage-fright'. As for the successes, no matter how carefully the target objects were concealed, it was impossible to ensure that there were no signs that could be perceived subliminally by the dowsers, giving away the hiding places. Non-verbal clues might have been betrayed

Left to right: dowsers Donald Curry, Pat Lucas, John Williamson, Bill Lewis and Betty Risden meet the cavers who took part in the Priddy Project. The dowsers were not told the aim of the experiment until the very last minute: they had to plot a cave system and locate pot-holers who were moving through the tunnels



Left: James Randi, the American conjurer, carried out a test on dowsers at Sydney in Australia in 1980. He concluded that there was nothing paranormal in the way the dowsers achieved their results, even though they scored above chance on the most important part of the experiment

by the test team. For example, as the dowser gets near to the target it is hard for onlookers to control heart rate and eye gaze; so the team could unconsciously have helped. It would be impossible to control any telepathic link between the dowser and the television team members who knew the hiding places. Could they unwittingly have guided the dowsers to success?

How could a test be devised to overcome these pitfalls? Could something be hidden in a way that would leave no trace and, at the same time, prevent the television team unconsciously aiding the dowsers in their search? With these questions in mind, a study was begun – a study that would both recruit dowsers and help in the design of a convincing television programme.

The first to help was Pat Lucas of Monmouth in Gwent. She had discovered her ability to divine water when her husband was trying to locate a new supply for their farm. She had copied an old dowser's technique and, to her surprise, was successful. This led to immediate employment by a local contractor who specialised in sinking boreholes in remote places.

The next volunteer, Bill Lewis, was also from Gwent, a retired electrical engineer from Abergavenny. Since his work on this project, Lewis has become one of a handful of extremely gifted British practitioners consulted for map and medical dowsing. To illustrate this latter skill, he examined the BBC team reporter, Linda Blandford. He ran his hands over her a little way above her body, and made a number of confident diagnoses before coming to a halt over her hip. He used a pendulum, seemingly to answer a few unspoken questions, and then announced: 'I'm rather puzzled about this. I'm picking up metal. I've met cases of steel pins in hips, but this is puzzling me. It's not a metal I'm familiar with.' In fact the reporter had suffered a skiing accident in Switzerland, which resulted in the use of an alloy plate and pins in her hip. Lewis's reading, subsequently endorsed by a doctor, was impressive; but there was no way of knowing whether Linda Blandford had helped him with his diagnosis through telepathy.

The next step was the setting up of a security operation. It was vitally important that the dowsers on the programme should be unaware of the design of the test. Clearly they would have to search for something already located or there would be no way to assess their success rate. The idea of specially buried targets had already been dismissed, so a search was begun for existing subterranean installations. Pipes, cables and railway tunnels, although hidden, had to be rejected as being too well-mapped. The idea of natural underground tunnels offered a solution to the problem.

It was decided that the dowsers should plot a subterranean cave system and, as an added incentive, also seek human targets within the cave system. As long as the television surface team were themselves kept unaware of the target team's whereabouts, but could locate them positively later, the idea seemed promising.

Dowsers often look for missing people but, more often than not, their targets are dead. Looking for someone alive should be more rewarding, it was thought. Dowsers tend to be practical people and they respond to practical challenges. Scientific tests involving tedious and repetitious tasks offer no practical encouragement to them and only too often they become bored; their results suffer accordingly. In this test, it was hoped to motivate the dowsers by setting a useful goal based on the fact that hardly a summer goes by without a lost pot-holer necessitating

Below: Pat Lucas, one of the dowsers at Priddy, discovered her ability to divine water when she tried dowsing for a new supply on the family farm – and found it

Right, top and centre: Bill Lewis at work with his pendulum. A retired engineer who has become much in demand for map and medical dowsing, he came closest to locating the position of the cavers at Priddy

Right: local children gather round John Williamson for a demonstration of dowsing. Williamson has a professional interest in dowsing: he manufactures divining equipment

difficult underground searches. If this test worked, it was argued, perhaps the dowser's art could be harnessed to help avert human tragedy in the future.

Where to make the test? The limestone of the Mendip Hills in Somerset is riddled with cave systems. Water courses have carved a honeycomb of tunnels, which caving clubs have explored and charted. A local rhyme gave another lead:

If thunder clouds be in the sky
'Tis best go down a cave that's dry
An' them as goes down Swildon's Pot
'll all get stuck as like as not.

This warned of the dangerous flash floods that follow rain in the Mendips – indeed the cavers' lives would be placed at risk if the weather changed. But Swildon's Hole in the village of Priddy was deemed perfect and the proposed experiment had gained a secret code-name: the Priddy Project.

Priddy stands on the very top of the Mendip Hills. Its few trees and farm buildings huddle round a pub and a church boasting a graveyard so stony that they have to blast the rock when burying their dead. At the time of the Black Death the village saw unexpected trade when the plague drove the sheep fair from Wells to isolated Priddy. Since then the only unexpected trade has been brought by the cavers, and Swildon's Hole is the star attraction. It became known in 1901 when digging first revealed its remarkable passages and chambers. Subsequent exploration has exposed many miles of the cave, doubling and redoubling its way beneath the village. New passages are constantly being added to the plans, which needed massive revision following a terrible flood that roared through the cave in 1968.

The entrance is tiny and masked by an old ash tree. Surface clues to the caves beneath are misleading: it might be guessed that the passageways follow the line of the valley bottom but they do not; they zigzag oddly at right angles to the valley. The dowsers would get no help from surface clues.

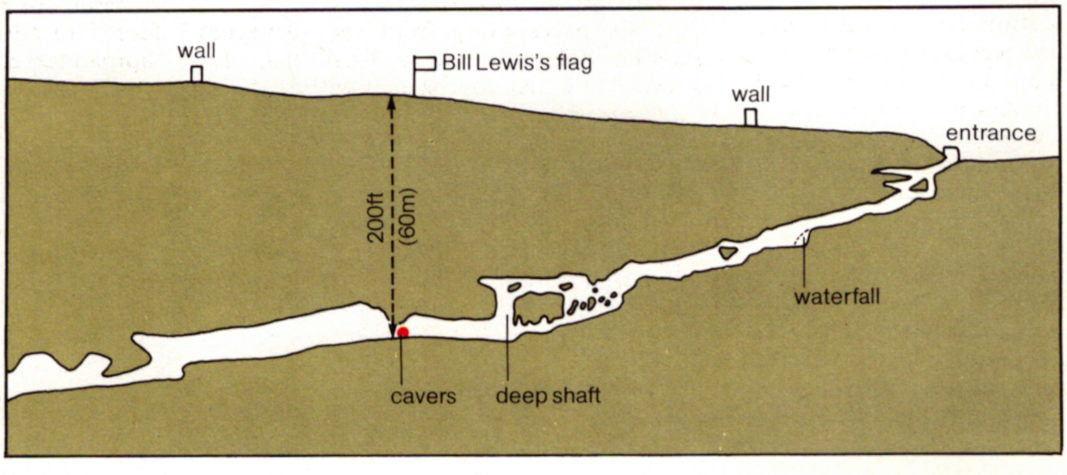
Hugh Pearson and Brian Prewer, experienced cavers, had the task of choosing a system for plotting the cavers' location once underground. They rejected seismic meters and radio probes before choosing equipment exploiting magnetic induction. The cavers were to carry wire into the cave, lay it in a coil, and then pass an electric current through it. The overground team could detect its field on the surface because a current would be generated in a surface coil by electrical induction. By this means the surface team could establish when they were directly over the underground coil. Such a system had been well-tried, being used to check the accuracy of cave surveys. It suited

Above: Donald Curry dowsing with a forked twig. He participated at Priddy as a representative of the British Society of Dowsers. All the volunteers did well in plotting the passages of Swildon's Hole, though none had tried dowsing for caves before. They even responded to an unexpected sharp bend in one passageway of which there is no sign on the surface

had accidentally discovered her skill while looking for drains.

Early one September morning a minibus collected the dowsers from the railway station at Bristol. They had no idea where they were to work, nor, indeed, what they were to seek. They were taken by a circuitous and misleading route to Priddy village. Conditions in Swildon's Hole were good with only a little water running through the passages. The cavers would first go along a sloping gallery 100 feet (30 metres) in length. Then they would drop 12 feet (3.5 metres) through an awkward waterfall. Beyond them lay a tight squeeze before a difficult descent down a 40-foot (12-metre) shaft. A further 100 feet (30 metres) from the foot of the drop was to be their resting place, 200 feet (60 metres) below ground. The support group, who had carried in the equipment, and the target cavers quietly retraced their steps and cleared the area before the dowsers were driven into Manor Farm. Only then were the dowsers told they would be divining for a cave or caves in which some cavers would be hidden.

The field chosen for the project was almost 6 acres (2.5 hectares) in area and bounded by stone walls and a wood. The field dipped and turned but gave no clue of what lay below. The dowsers asked to meet



Above: the route the cavers took and their final position. The flag is Bill Lewis's marker; this proved to be about 18 feet (5.5 metres) away from the human target, as determined by the signalling equipment used by the location team on the surface. Later, however, it was realised that the signal was imprecise – which could considerably reduce Bill Lewis's error

the purpose exactly: only the cavers would know where they were hiding, and they would have no personal communication with the surface. This was the security needed: nobody on the television team could inadvertently give the dowsers any clues.

There were still doubts as to whether dowsing would serve to find caves, but it would give things away to ask the dowsers outright at this planning stage. Pat Lucas and Bill Lewis had offered to participate as two of the five required volunteers. Donald Curry agreed to represent the British Society of Dowsers and John Williamson represented the makers of dowsing equipment. Williamson offered to bring a whole range of wands, rods and pendulums from his company in Hastings. The fifth dowser was Betty Risden from Rode in Somerset, who, like Pat Lucas, the cavers, who were ready to re-enter the cave, before starting their search and this was agreed. None of them had tried cave dowsing before and they all started on an equal footing. Each of the five had an assistant who was to drive flags into the ground wherever a cave was sensed below. Soon the field was full of crisscrossing dowsers, hazel wands, wire rods and pendulums. After an hour they were asked to locate the cavers.

One by one they finished, and were unanimous in stating that it was easier to locate humans than to find the hidden passageways. Last to decide was Bill Lewis. Exactly what he and his fellow dowsers had recorded remained to be seen. They left the field as the survey team arrived.

Overhead a helicopter conducted an aerial survey of the field and the clusters of flags.

Above: the survey team in the process of plotting the position of the cavers. They did this by means of an aerial that detected electrical currents in the equipment below ground

On the ground careful measurements were taken. To the dowsers' delight, their flags corresponded exactly to the known passageways of Swildon's Hole. They had closely followed the general features of the cave and they had all responded to an unexpected sharp bend to the north-west, though no surface feature indicated this change of route. There was one unexplained cluster of flags in the south-west corner of the field, which had to be recorded as a 'miss'. William Stanton, the author of *The complete caves of Mendip*, an eminent caver himself and the supervisor of the survey team, maintained that there were no extensions of Swildon's Hole in that area. The dowsers shrugged, unconvinced. Stanton also pointed out that their plotting of passageways beyond the point reached by the cavers was rather vague.

Below ground it was time for the hidden cavers to switch on the power and energise their coil of wire. The surface team quickly detected the weak magnetic field and, wielding a huge circular aerial, began to move over the field. Knowing the signal to be strongest directly over the target, they could mark out lines that converged over it. The dowsers were anxious as they watched the final readings being made and the final pegs being driven in.

A disappointed dowser

Just six paces away from the surveyors' ranging pole fluttered a small flag: Bill Lewis's. He had approached within 18 feet (5.5 metres) of his hidden human target. 'Not very good,' he sighed, 'I'd hoped to get nearer to it than that.' The other dowsers commiserated with Lewis. Although all their flags ringed the cavers, his was the closest and they sensed his bitter disappointment. It was not until the results were analysed later that it was realised his disappointment was largely misplaced. The odds against the dowsers hitting upon the target by chance were 250,000 to one: 6 acres (2.5 hectares) is about 250,000 square feet (24,000 square metres). Lewis's 18 feet (5.5 metres) from the target shortened the odds considerably. Any flag placed within this distance of the target would lie within a circle having an area of 1000 square feet (93 square metres). The odds against this happening by chance are 250 to one.

The location team explained that their electromagnetic system required the underground coil to be absolutely level, but the passage floor had been very uneven and the coil had to be supported on rocks. Despite the water, mud and darkness, they had conscientiously used spirit levels to get the best result. Nevertheless, the tiniest error on the cave floor would be considerably amplified by the signal's 200-foot (60-metre) journey to the surface. Lewis's 18-foot (5.5-metre) 'error' represented only a 5° drift from the vertical. Could the horizontal coil have been a few degrees out of alignment? The makers of the equipment advise users to allow a little latitude in difficult situations by adding or subtracting 10 per cent of the vertical height to the conclusions of the surface coil: 10 per cent of 200 feet (60 metres) easily includes Lewis's 18-foot (5.5-metre) margin – so Lewis need not have been too disappointed.

Cautiously the survey team verified their findings by taking further measurements on the cave plans; they could not find anything at fault. Even the sceptical Stanton was forced to admit that three out of the five 'human target' flags marked positions where the cavers had paused at one time or another. As for the flags in the south-west corner, Stanton was adamant that there were no known extensions to Swildon's Hole in that area, thought to be solid rock.

Twice since then, however, in 1975 and 1977, digging and exploration have taken place at Swildon's Hole. Other survey methods have predicted a new cavern in precisely the area selected by the dowsers. This new digging has been tantalisingly inconclusive – but if cavers do break through into a new chamber there, the dowsers who took part in the Priddy Project will show no surprise.

Below: a helicopter conducts an aerial survey of the markers positioned by the dowsers in the field above the caves

When a north London family seemed to be at the centre of a poltergeist attack, several experts were called in to assess the authenticity of the phenomena. But, as investigator GUY LYON PLAYFAIR explains, the case posed more questions than it answered

Enfield: whatever next?

POLTERGEIST ACTIVITY is a syndrome – a coming together of separate events to form one collective manifestation. We have not yet identified all the symptoms, but the syndrome has been with us for a long time. In the first century AD, Suetonius described an occupant of a former home of the Emperor Augustus as being thrown out of bed, clothes and all, by 'a sudden occult force'. Exactly the same thing happened nearly 2000 years later to Janet Harper in Enfield. In fact, it happened several times, once even including the mattress.

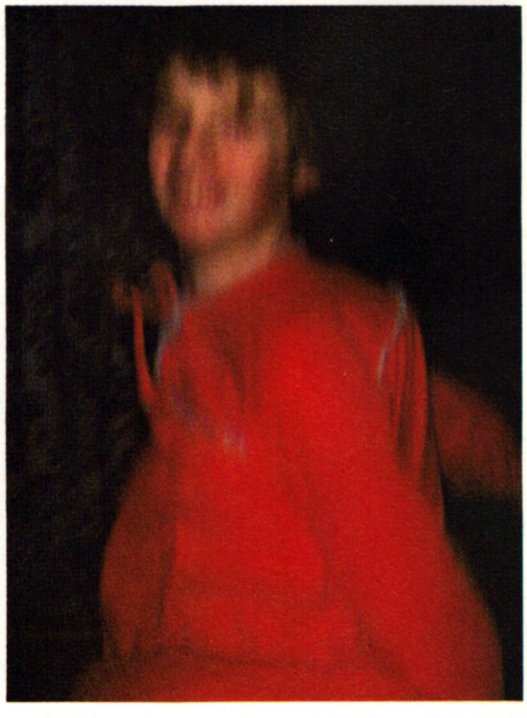
The Enfield case included examples of every major form of poltergeist symptom previously recorded. The most frequently observed or reported were: knocking sounds, movement of objects large or small, interference with bedclothes, appearance of water on floors, outbreaks of fire (followed by their inexplicable extinguishing), human levitation, interference with electrical systems, and a variety of altered states of consciousness suggestive of trance or 'possession'.

A full account of this activity would fill several books, even if it were limited to testimony from reliable witnesses. But the events of one day – 15 December 1977 – stand out from the rest.

It is often suggested that poltergeist activity is associated with young children close to the age of puberty. This is not always true; cases are on record in which no children were involved. But it was certainly true of the Enfield case, for 15 December was the day of Janet's first menstruation.

For some days prior to this, an extraordinary raucous male voice had been making itself heard, apparently emitting from her throat, over which Janet herself repeatedly stated she had no conscious control. The voice claimed several identities, all of them male and none of them verifiable, with two notable exceptions. Whether it was a manifestation of a secondary personality or an independent entity cannot be established. At times, its conversation closely resembled that of Janet in her normal state. But occasionally it provided true information not known to her. It gave an account of the manner and place of death of the former occupant of the house, who had died before Janet was born, the details subsequently being verified.

Whatever the true origin of the information provided by Janet's bass voice, it gave the investigators the chance to address the presumed source of the poltergeist disturbances directly. As soon as physicist David



Above: kitchen furniture was thrown about by the invisible agency at Enfield. Here (left to right) Rose, John and Janet Harper pose beside the havoc – but only Janet can raise a smile for the photographer. Her frequent equanimity has led to various speculations: was she insensitive to the apparent horrors that surrounded her family; was she the focus of it all – or was she the trickster who kept investigators and the media on the hop? Whatever the truth of the matter, Janet was certainly at the centre of much of the phenomena – such as being apparently whirled about by invisible forces (right)

Robertson joined the team, he lost no time in attempting some practical experiments. Hoping to be able to observe human levitation, he asked Janet to bounce up and down on her bed and attempt to take off. He was then ordered out of the room by the 'voice', and when he heard Janet call out that she was being 'levitated', he found he could not open the door. A bed had apparently been pushed against it.

Rose, Janet's elder sister, became alarmed and went to fetch her neighbour Peggy Nottingham. Janet then attempted another levitation, again with the door closed, and subsequently claimed that not only had she risen into the air, but had passed through the wall of her semi-detached house into Peggy's bedroom on the other side of it.

Poltergeists – whether they be 'unruly spirits' as used to be believed, or some powerful subconscious exertion from a human mind – turn the rational, everyday world upside down. Bedframes may appear at the bottom of a flight of stairs, as at Enfield (above left), or drawers may be wrenched out of a bureau (above) by an invisible agency. The 'normal' response to such phenomena is that someone in the household is deliberately faking the ostensibly paranormal effects. But research has frequently indicated that many poltergeist cases are genuinely inexplicable in normal terms

Nobody believed her. Mrs Nottingham had already witnessed a good deal of strange activity since the first day of the case, in August 1977 – some of it in her own house. But this was a bit too much. She calmly told Janet to try it again, then went back to her house, where – she later admitted – she half expected to find Janet.

Janet was not there, but on the carpet beside her bed Mrs Nottingham found a book (entitled *Fun and games for children*) belonging to Janet. It had certainly not been there when she had made her bed, and Janet had not been in her house.

Robertson then handed Janet a large and heavy plastic-covered sofa cushion and asked her to make it 'disappear'. He was hoping to obtain direct evidence for one of the most controversial of all alleged paranormal phenomena – teleportation, the passage of solid matter through solid matter.

A local tradesman later testified that at this time he was walking along the road towards the Harpers' house when he suddenly saw a large red cushion appear on its roof, in his direct line of vision. Had anybody opened the bedroom window and leaned out to place it on the roof, he would certainly have seen them. (I myself subsequently tried to repeat this incident, and found it possible, though very difficult and quite perilous!)

This was not all the tradesman saw. When he arrived outside the house, he could see Janet through the upper bedroom window, as he put it: 'floating horizontally across the room', accompanied by books, dolls and cushions that seemed as if they were being whirled around on pieces of elastic. The tradesman's evidence is of interest since he did not know the Harpers and did not believe a word of what neighbours had told him concerning their poltergeist. What he saw that day made him change his mind, and left a profound and lasting impression on him.

Much of his testimony was supported by another eyewitness, school-crossing supervisor Mrs Hazel Short, who was on duty right across the road from the Harpers' house. She too insisted that she had seen Janet 'definitely horizontal' in the air, and from her description the investigators later calculated that Janet must have been about 28 inches (70 centimetres) above her bed, the mattress of which was hard and firm.

A further witness, contacted several weeks later, was apparently still too confused and frightened by what she had seen to make a statement. Whatever really happened in Enfield on 15 December 1977, several witnesses undoubtedly saw a good deal they could not explain.

Several other members of the Society for Psychical Research (SPR), in addition to chief investigator Maurice Grosse, David Robertson and myself, made visits to the Enfield house during the case, but almost none of them witnessed anything they considered paranormal. This inevitably led some of them to cast doubts on the evidence presented by Grosse and myself at the 1978 SPR international conference in Cambridge, and subsequently led to considerable controversy about the case.

How good is the evidence for the reality of

the Enfield poltergeist? Whatever its quality, which ranges from unverifiable subjective reports of 'apparitions' to signed written statements by a number of responsible people, it cannot be denied that more documentary evidence was gathered on this case than on any previous one of its type. About 200 hours of tape recording were made, and a special committee of the SPR carried out a lengthy follow-up investigation, during which most of the principal witnesses were re-questioned.

In camera and on film

The photographic evidence has tended to add to the controversy surrounding the case, although much of it is not quite up to professional standards. Freelance photographer Graham Morris spent much of his spare time in the house, over a period of several weeks, hoping to record paranormal activity as it happened, and two of the many sequences he obtained on his remote-controlled motor-driven camera are of special interest. One shows two pillows, one of which is in mid-air and the other on the floor, but still, apparently, in motion. The other shows Janet's bedclothes seemingly being pulled off her, while at the same time the curtain beside her bed twists into a tight spiral and seems to blow into the room – although the window behind it was closed.

This curtain-twisting phenomenon was observed several times by Janet – who claimed that it once wrapped itself around her neck as if trying to strangle her – and also by her mother. She, it must be emphasised, was ready at all times to denounce her daughter if she were caught playing tricks, as she occasionally was later in the case.

While gathering the evidence (and doing their best to stop the activity for the family's sake), the investigators made what attempts they could to obtain evidence of some scientific value. With the co-operation of one of Britain's leading phoneticians, Maurice Grosse managed to record Janet's deep voice on a laryngograph, an instrument that registers patterns made by radio-frequency waves as they pass through the larynx. The results confirmed what a speech therapist had already deduced: that the deep voice was not produced by Janet's normal vocal equipment, but by the so-called false vocal folds. Actors can learn to speak with these (to produce a gravelly voice, for instance), but for most people it is a painful process. Yet Janet, or the poltergeist, could keep it up for three hours without her normal voice being affected at all. It is also worth noting that abnormally deep voices coming from young girls are a recognised symptom of poltergeist cases. Numerous examples are given in T. K. Oesterreich's book *Possession, demoniacal and other* (1966), such as that of 11-year-old Dinah Dagg through whom 'a deep gruff voice, as of an old man . . . instantly replied in a language which cannot be repeated here.'

At Enfield the closest we came to a properly controlled scientific experiment was David Robertson's paranormal metal bending test. He attached a piece of metal to a strain gauge and a chart recorder, so that any strain on the metal would be recorded on paper. During the two-hour session, while Janet was under continuous observation and not touching the metal, several sharp deflections appeared on the chart; Robertson saw

Poltergeists are famous arsonists – and also conscientious extinguishers of the fires they start. At Enfield there were several fiery occurrences, such as the severe burning of two pound notes (right) and a fire that flared up between kitchen fittings and then mysteriously died out, leaving a noticeable scorch mark (far right).

Right: an invisible force apparently hurls a pillow from one of the girls' beds to join another on the floor. However, critics have pointed out that this sequence does not prove the existence of a poltergeist – the pillows could, they say, have been thrown by one of the girls

Right: investigator Maurice Grosse found the Harpers' lavatory brush securely knotted up with the light flex. Certainly the brush had been in its usual place the last time any of the adults had been in the toilet and, as far as they knew, none of the children had been there after that. Is this evidence of paranormality – or, as one SPR critic suggests, had one of the children sneaked in and tied up the brush by standing on the toilet seat?

the metal bend through about 15° before it finally snapped in half.

In 1982, four years after the Enfield poltergeist disturbances had ended, Janet took part in a strictly controlled laboratory experiment at Birkbeck College, London, supervised by Professor J. B. Hasted, head of the physics department, and observed by four others including Robertson and Grosse. The purpose of the experiment, which was one of a series using several different subjects, was to examine the possibility that certain people can lose weight paranormally – a phenomenon that, if genuine, is clearly related to that of levitation. And since Janet had already been reported as having levitated, she seemed a natural choice as subject.

She sat on a chair placed on a specially constructed platform that functioned as a weighing scale. This was connected to a computer and a chart recorder, which monitored any change in weight. If someone stands on this platform and jumps into the air, the chart will show a peak above the stable 'baseline' trace, and this will be followed at once by a downward deflection on the chart when the body lands. However, the apparatus began to behave abnormally very shortly after Janet sat on it.

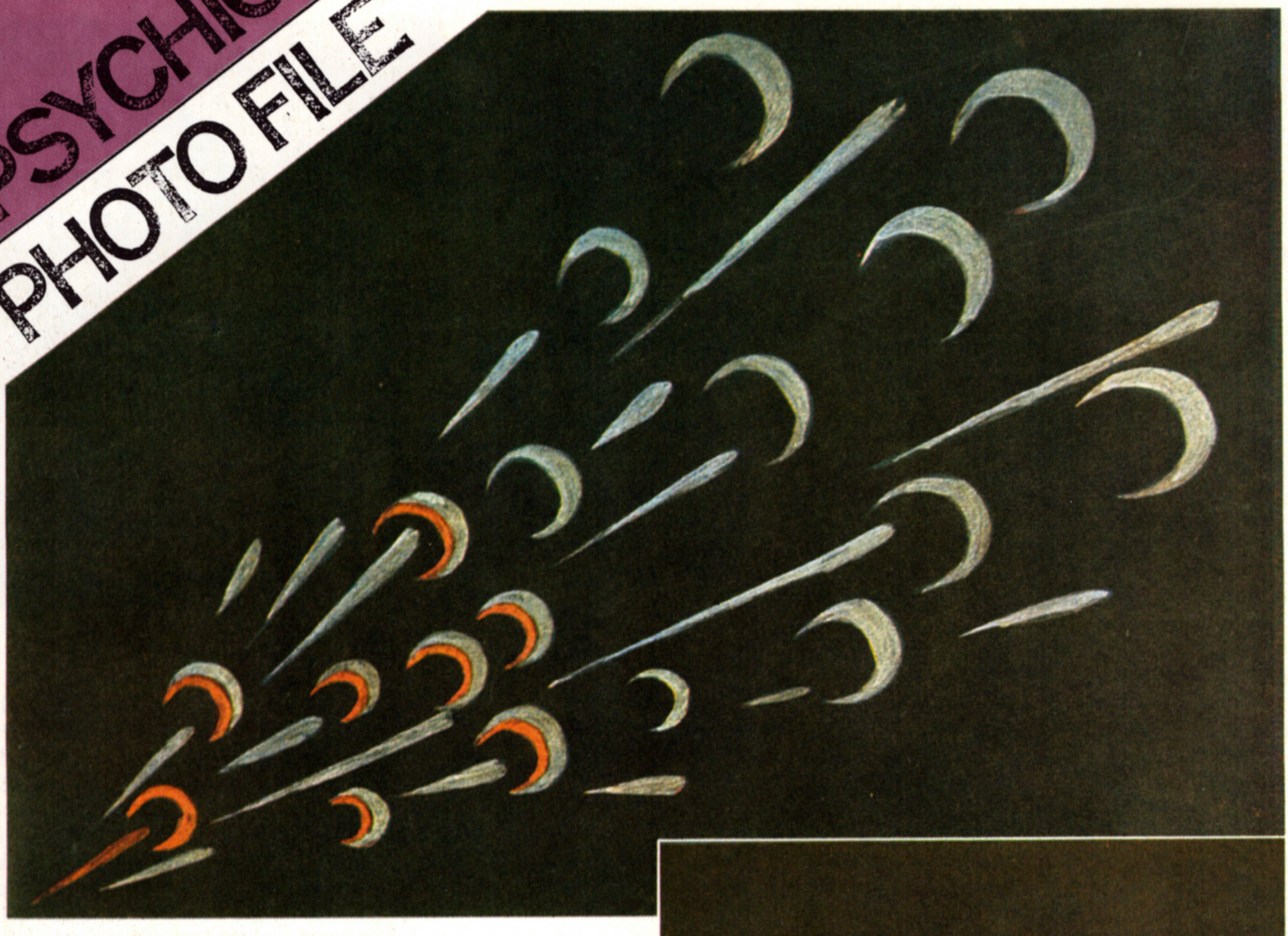
The observers were surprised to find that, although Janet had sat perfectly still on the chair, the pen of the chart recorder had moved steadily upwards for about 30 seconds, and during this time it had also recorded several sharp peaks. Two of these surges were so strong that the pen had run off the top of the paper. According to the chart, Janet had lost about 2 pounds (1 kilogram) in weight for about 30 seconds. 'I cannot explain this in normal terms,' said Hasted.

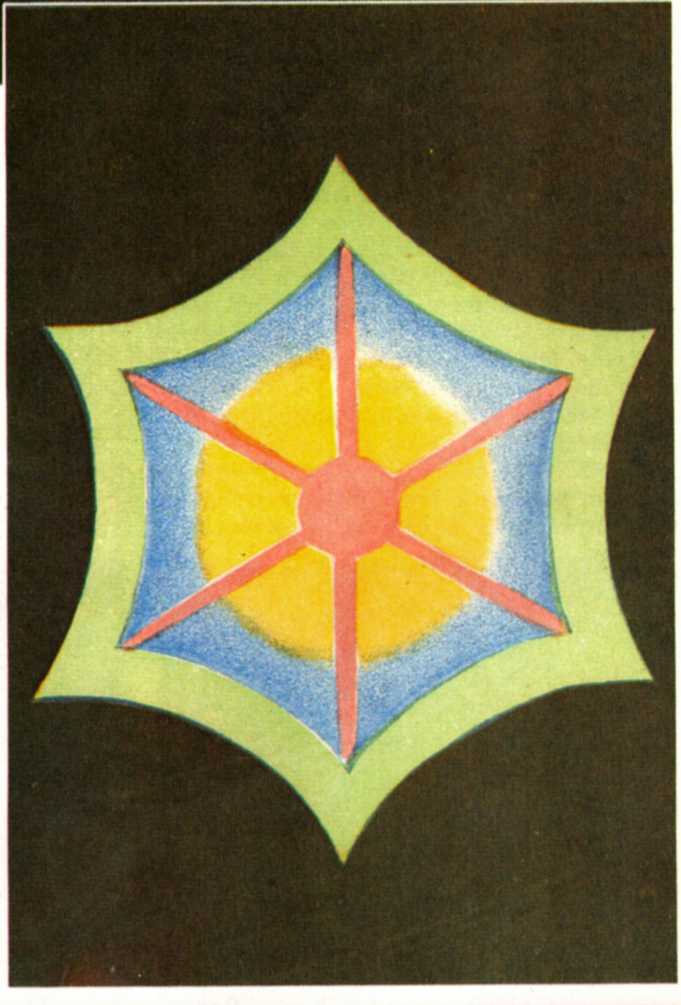
Professor Hasted points out that the experiments he conducted with Janet are not proof of levitation (and although she apparently lost weight paranormally she did not rise from the chair into the air). He thinks it possible, however, that in view of her record as a metal bender (sometimes without touching the metal), she may have been exerting a psychokinetic influence on the piano wires on which the platform was suspended. Indeed, the brief bursts on the chart were similar to those recorded during successful metal bending sessions with other subjects.

Whatever the explanation, Janet seems to have had a paranormal effect on the weighing machine. It is gratifying that some positive results have emerged from the destructive chaos of the Enfield poltergeist case, which put a severe strain on both the Harper family and the SPR investigators who stayed with them until the disturbances ended in October 1978. If future poltergeist victims are as co-operative as the Harpers, and scientists follow the lead of the likes of Professor Hasted, we shall surely learn more about how the human mind can, in certain states, apparently influence solid objects.

But at least one SPR officer was not impressed by the poltergeist. See page 2458

PSYCHIC PHOTO FILE





The capacity of the human mind to create thoughts so powerful that their forms are visible has long been attested to by mystic religions. We present some pictures that suggest that this capacity indeed exists – casual photographs that include strange figures that no one saw at the time; the shapes, seen by sensitives, that our thoughts form; and photographs produced by psychics by mind-power alone

'Thoughts are things,' insisted Annie Besant and C.W. Leadbeater in their book *Thought forms* (1905) – and these things were visible to those sensitive enough to see them. The appearance of the thought form was the outcome of three factors: the quality of the thought determined the colour, the nature of the thought determined the shape, and the 'definiteness' of the thought determined the clarity of the outline of the thought form. The thought form of a person 'not terrified but seriously startled' (above), for instance, was represented by an 'onrush' of crescent-shaped forms; the colours are the 'livid grey' of fear, which almost immediately becomes tinged with the red of anger as 'the man is already partially recovering from the shock, and beginning to be angry that he allowed himself to be startled.' The other example (right) represents a conscious attempt to feel love and sympathy for mankind – and is the result of an attempt to imagine love and sympathy pouring forth 'in the six directions' of Hindu mystical thought. Everyone, Besant and Leadbeater believed, is sensitive to thought forms, even if not everyone can actually see them. Thus one's thoughts, even those that remain unspoken, have a constant, if subtle, influence on other people. 'It is thus evident,' Besant and Leadbeater concluded, 'that every man who thinks along high lines is doing missionary work, even though he may be entirely unconscious of it.'

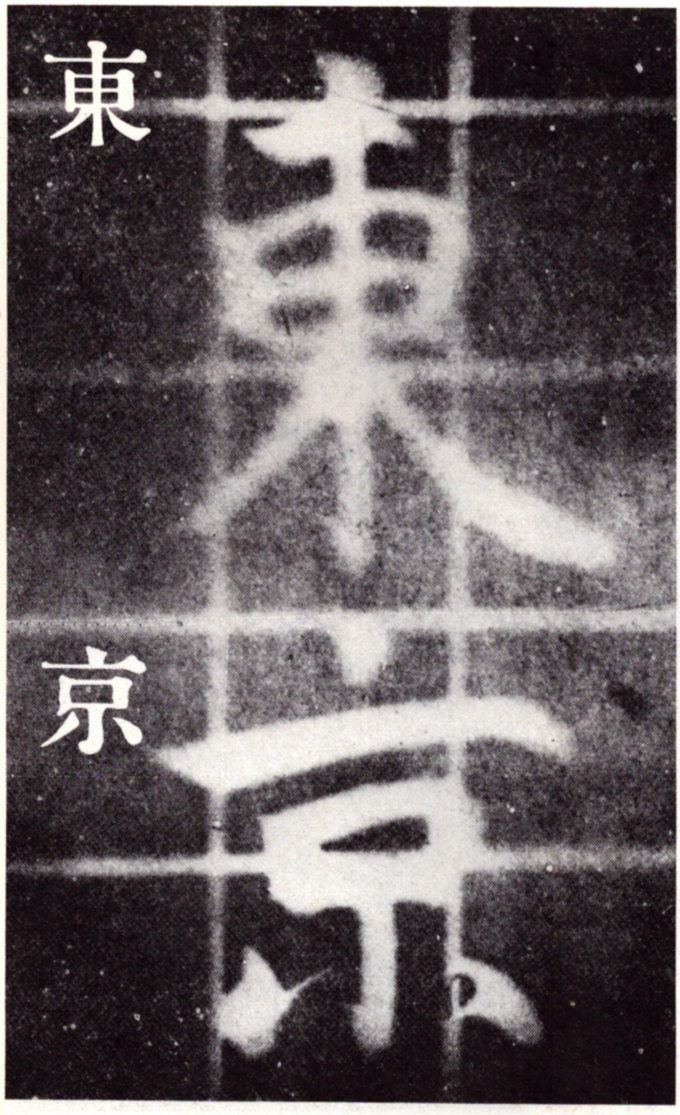
Above: this photograph was taken by London medium Gladys Hayter (see page 603) of her daughter Dawn driving the new car she had given her in March 1979. When the film was developed in September of the same year, both women were astonished to see on the print something that neither of them had been aware of at the time – the head of a small, blonde girl who was apparently sitting on the back seat of the car (see enlargement, right). Who was the mystery girl? In a sitting with the direct voice medium Leslie Flint, Mrs Hayter's mother 'spoke', asking Gladys what she thought of the photograph and going on to observe that the girl, whose name was Sheila, was a happy little child who had attached herself to the direct voice medium's circle, of which Gladys herself was a member. 'Well she's a nice little thing of course,' commented Gladys's mother, 'but you know she's nothing to do with our family . . . . She's a little girl who's been coming round and playing, can you hear me?' In a later sitting a spirit named Samantha Rigg-Milner revealed that the little girl's surname was Wilkins. 'I know the – I know who the little girl – I have seen her you know . . . . Sheila – I have seen her in the car in your picture; I am very friendly with her.'

Mrs Hayter herself is convinced that the face of a golden Labrador dog can be seen between Dawn and the ghostly child; this, she suggests, is Brandy, a dog that belonged to her daughter and was killed at the age of 18 months in 1974. The dog is also apparently a member of the medium's circle – and Gladys's mother confirmed that 'the dog is often around' in the afterworld.

PSYCHIC PHOTO FILE

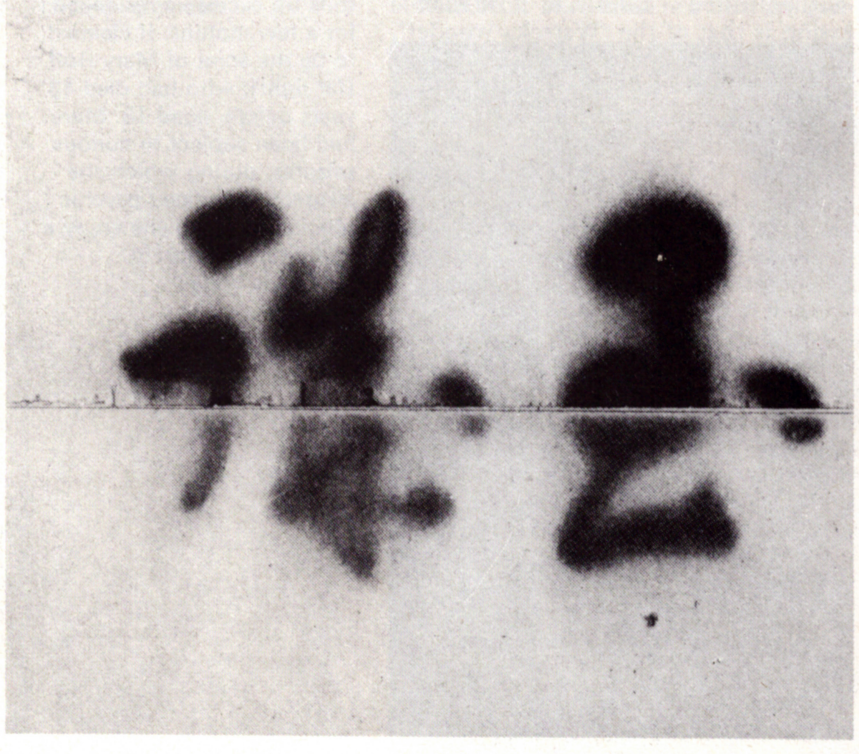
Above: this picture of a pleasant tea party on a summer lawn was taken by Arthur Springer, a retired police inspector, in his own garden at Tingewick, Buckinghamshire, England, in 1916. Allegedly no one was aware of the presence of the dog on the left-hand side of the picture until the film was developed.

Although, unlike human figures (see page 1930), spirit photographs of animals have proved remarkably difficult to capture in the studio (see page 1958), ghostly figures of animals sometimes appear in photographs taken by amateurs – generally, as here, without having been seen by the photographer at the time. Often they are later recognised as dead pets of which the photographer, or someone else who was present when the picture was taken, was very fond – and it has been conjectured that the images on the film are conjured up by the intensity of emotion that was felt for the dead animal. The women at the tea table in this particular picture are clearly happily unaware of the presence of anything as weird as a phantom dog, yet the composition of the photograph itself raises an interesting point. If the photographer himself was also unaware that the ghostly dog was there, why did he choose to set his camera up in such a way as to frame it perfectly? If he did not see it, as he claimed, the shot is a curiously asymmetrical one, with the women unnaturally grouped to the right of the picture. Was the photographer surreptitiously leaving space to add a fake dog when he developed the film – or was his subconscious mind perhaps somehow aware of the presence of something that he could not see, but that he believed might become visible when photographed?

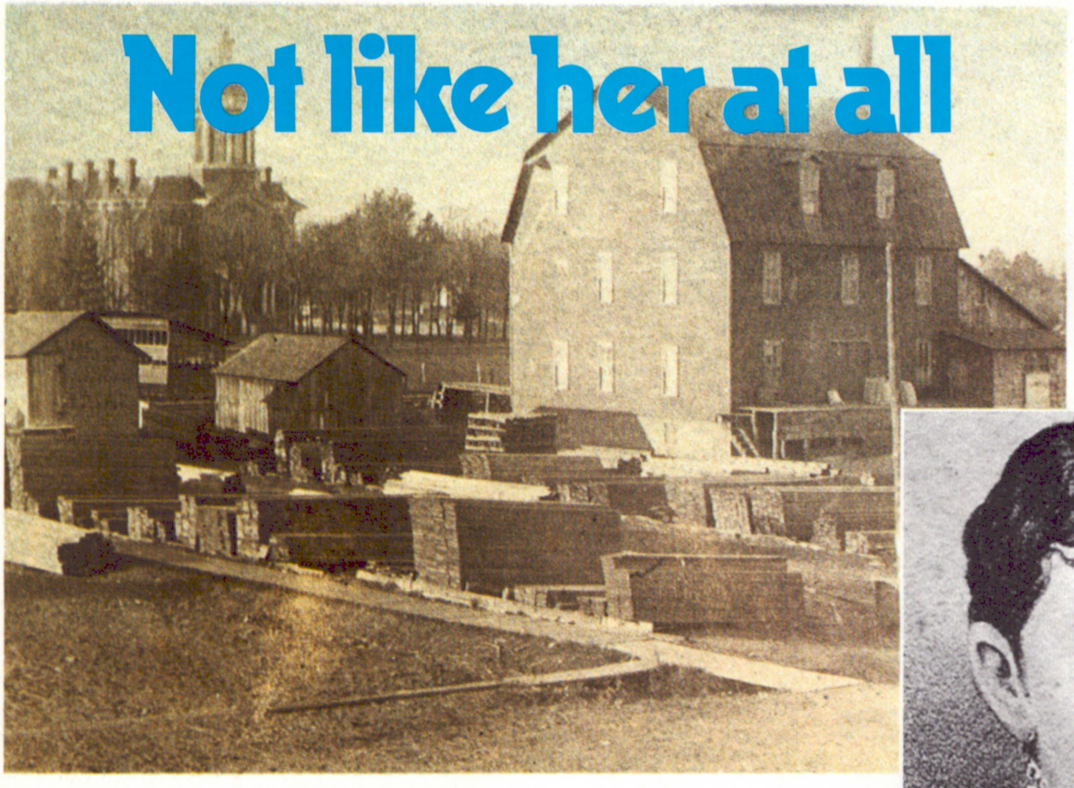


This thoughtographic image (above) was produced under the supervision of Professor Fukurai on 10 May 1911 by the psychic Mrs Sadako Takahashi. Under hypnosis, a secondary personality emerged to give this information: 'The picture . . . was my thoughtography . . . . I wanted to give the warning that one should not be tempted by personal profit.' On 10 February 1917 Mr Kohichi Mita, a stage magician, produced these two plates (below) at a public experiment in the city of Nagoya. Separately, the two plates did not make any sense; but together, remarkably, they formed two Japanese characters.

Between 1910 and 1913, Professor T. Fukurai of the Imperial University, Tokyo, president of the Psychical Institute of Japan, conducted a remarkable series of experiments in clairvoyance and thoughtography with a number of Japanese psychics. Among those whom he investigated extensively was a Mrs Ikuko Nagao, who became aware of her psychic abilities after the death of her small son. Mrs Nagao was spectacularly successful in both clairvoyance and thoughtography experiments; in the latter, she was asked to produce images on sealed photographic plates. Like many psychics, she was able to produce impressions of objects (left: a thoughtographic image of a figure from a Buddhist religious scroll); perhaps more remarkable, however, was her ability to produce accurate impressions of Japanese characters. Critics objected that the figures could be produced equally well by exposing the plate through a piece of pasteboard or similar material with the shape of the letter cut out of it. This example (above), of two particularly complex characters, was made to show how difficult such faking would have been – and the phenomena were, of course, produced in the presence of expert witnesses.



Not like her at all



Claiming to be possessed by the spirit of a young woman long dead, a 13-year-old girl played the role to the full – by moving in with the dead woman's parents and living as their daughter. ARCHIE ROY tells of a reincarnation in a small American town

Above: Watseka, Illinois, as it looked in the late 19th century. People were very willing to hear tales of returned 'spirits' at this time, for Spiritualism was the rage in America

Right: Lurancy Vennum, who was besieged by numerous 'spirits' before one of them took up exclusive residence for a few months. It claimed to be the spirit of Mary Roff (far right), who had died 13 years before, aged 18. Mary had been subject to curious seizures, during which she allegedly produced psychic phenomena. Did she enjoy a brief reincarnation in Lurancy's body?

ONE OF THE MOST EXTRAORDINARY and best-authenticated cases of ostensible possession is that of the 'Watseka wonder'. The person at the centre of events, Mary Lurancy Vennum, was born in April 1864 in the American township of Milford, about 7 miles (11 kilometres) from Watseka, Illinois. Until the age of 13 Lurancy enjoyed good health. Then, one day in July 1877, she told her family: 'There were persons in my room last night, and they called "Rancy! Rancy!" and I felt their breath on my face.' The next night she left her bed, protesting that she could not sleep because every time she tried to sleep she heard voices calling 'Rancy! Rancy!'

This episode was followed a few days later by some kind of seizure. The next day, 12 July, she had another, which led to her announcing to her family that she could see heaven and angels and people, now dead, whom she had known. These incidents, in which she seemed almost entranced, continued and, together with her wild statements, persuaded onlookers that she was insane.

Early in 1878 two acquaintances of the Vennums, Mr and Mrs Roff, suggested that they should call in Dr E. W. Stevens of Janesville, Wisconsin. They agreed and on 31 January Dr Stevens and Mr Roff called upon the Vennums. Lurancy appeared to be possessed by a number of entities one after the other, including an old woman called Katrina Hogan and a man called Willie Canning. Dr Stevens managed with some effort to hypnotise her. The girl calmed down and claimed that she had been controlled by evil spirits. She also said that there was a spirit who wanted to control her and gave its name as . . . Mary Roff. Mr Roff exclaimed: 'That is my daughter; Mary Roff is my girl. Why, she has been in heaven 12 years. Yes, let her come, we'll be glad to have her come.'

Mary Roff had lived in Watseka for most of her life, until her death when she was still less than 19 years old, in July 1865. (Lurancy at this time was just over a year old.) From the age of six months Mary had suffered from violent seizures, which became worse during her life. Allegedly her illnesses made her notorious in the neighbourhood during her lifetime: and she was regarded as having clairvoyant powers, which were investigated

by a number of the town's citizens.

After Lurancy's announcement that Mary's spirit had returned, the excited Mr Roff assured her that Mary, because of her own sufferings in life, would be able to help her. Lurancy seems to have taken the advice of some of the other spirits as well. She announced that Mary would displace the other spirits. Mr Roff made the further suggestion that Lurancy's mother should bring her to the Roffs' house '. . . and Mary will be likely to come along, and a mutual benefit may be derived from our former experience with Mary.' One can imagine

Below right: Richard Hodgson, a sceptic who exposed several fraudulent mediums, but was convinced of the genuineness of some. He studied the Lurancy Vennum case and believed that it had to be explained in terms of a spirit taking over Lurancy's person

very easily the welter of emotions – fear, hope, wishful thinking, terror, bewilderment, despair – tearing at the two families. The following day Mr Vennum called upon Mr Roff to tell him that his daughter now gave every sign of *being* Mary Roff. During the next week, the girl was 'mild, docile, polite and timid, knowing none of the family, but constantly pleading to go home'.

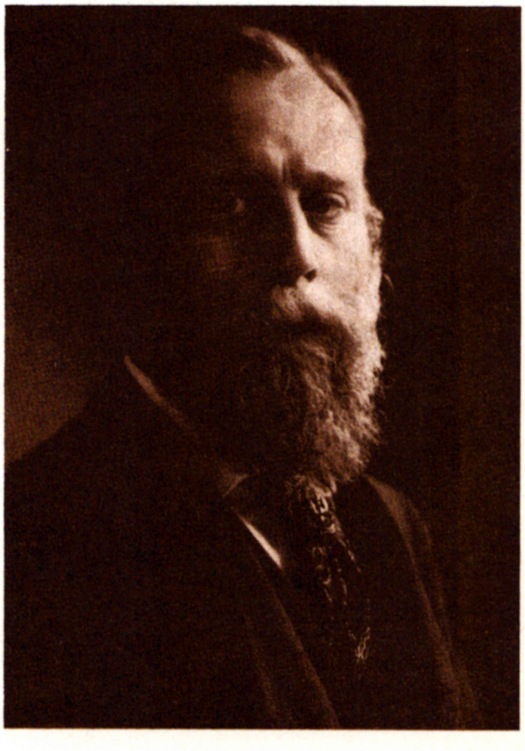
The 'Mary Roff' personality maintained its control. About a week later, Mary Roff's mother and sister paid a visit to the Vennum household. 'Mary', seeing them coming along the street, exclaimed: 'There comes my ma and sister Nervie.' The name 'Nervie' was one that the late Mary Roff had used for her sister – by this late date now married – when she was a girl. When they entered the house, 'Mary' was overcome with emotion and pleaded to be allowed to 'go home' with them. The Vennums agreed, and on 11 February 'Mary Roff' went home.

It is on record that 'Mary' remained there for three months, behaving exactly as if she were indeed the Roffs' dead daughter, recognising everyone she had known when she had been alive, remembering scores of incidents from her past. Some of these events had happened 13 to 25 years before. When she met friends or relatives of the Roffs whom she had not seen for many years – if it is accepted that she *was* 'Mary Roff' – she would still recognise them but comment on changes in their appearance. Some days after she arrived at the Roffs' house, a Mrs Parker and her daughter-in-law, Nellie Parker, came to visit the Roffs. Mrs Parker had been a neighbour of the Roffs in Middleport in 1852 and in Watseka in 1860. 'Mary' immediately recognised them as if she had last seen them the day before, although it was 17 years since the Roffs' daughter Mary had last seen them. Particular clothes, a box of letters and a collar the dead daughter had sewn were seized on by 'Mary', in a number of cases with comments that showed she knew the exact circumstances concerning their relationship with the dead girl.

Naturally the unhappy Vennum family visited the Roffs on occasion to see how their daughter – if indeed she was still their daughter! – was progressing. The girl did not seem to recognise any member of the Vennum family or the Vennums' friends and neighbours. As the visits continued, however, she became more friendly towards them, but gave every indication that to her they were strangers that she was just coming to know.

This extraordinary situation continued until 7 May. On that day 'Mary' told Mrs Roff that Lurancy was returning. The girl sat down, closed her eyes and almost immediately opened them. She looked around and exclaimed: 'Where am I? I was never here before.'

Mrs Roff reassured her but the girl had



now taken on the personality of Lurancy. She pleaded to be allowed to go home. She was still pleading five minutes later when a reversal took place and the 'Mary' personality took over once more. From then until 19 May the girl's body continued to be occupied by the 'Mary' personality, though more and more frequently she would be transformed into 'Lurancy'. On 19 May, for example, while Lurancy's brother Henry was present, 'Lurancy' came through and recognised Henry; then the reversion to 'Mary' again took place.

In the record kept by Mr Roff we find him writing on the morning of 21 May:

> Mary is to leave the body of Rancy today, about eleven o'clock, so she says. She is bidding neighbours and friends good-bye. Rancy to return home all right today. Mary came from her room upstairs, where she was sleeping with Lottie, at ten o'clock last night, lay down by us, hugged and kissed us, and cried because she must bid us good-bye, telling us to give all her pictures, marbles, and cards, and twenty-five cents Mrs Vennum had given her, to Rancy, and had us promise to visit Rancy often.

One of 'Mary's' last acts was to arrange that after she and Mrs Alter – her supposed sister – had said their goodbyes, Mrs Alter should take Lurancy to Mr Roff's office. By the time Mrs Alter had arrived at the office, Lurancy was firmly back in control. She obviously accepted the Vennums as her own family when she got to their house and settled in contentedly.

Lurancy Vennum's subsequent life was essentially a normal one. She married a farmer, George Binning, in January 1882 and had a family. In 1884 they moved farther west. It is on record that occasionally 'Mary' would return, in a manner reminiscent of a 'spirit control' taking over an entranced medium, but the days of full possession were over.

This extraordinary story raises a number of questions. The first, naturally, is: what authenticity can we ascribe to it?

The first account of the case was written by Dr E. W. Stevens, the man who had been called in by the Vennums on the advice of Mr Roff. Dr Stevens kept a close watch on the progress of the case, interviewed the chief witnesses and had his written account confirmed by both sets of parents. A paper by him was published in the *Religio-Philosophical Journal* in 1879, followed after a short time by a pamphlet entitled *The Watseka Wonder*.

Visit from a sceptic

The celebrated and notoriously sceptical psychical researcher Dr Richard Hodgson visited Watseka in April 1890 and questioned the major witnesses in the case still living in the neighbourhood. His account of what they told him was subsequently published in the *Religio-Philosophical Journal* for 20 December 1890.

> I have no doubt that the incidents occurred substantially as described in the narrative by Dr Stevens, and in my view the only other interpretation of the case – besides the spiritistic – that seems at all plausible is that which has been put forward as the alternative to the spiritistic theory to account for the trance-communications of Mrs Piper and similar cases, viz., secondary personality with supernormal powers. It would be difficult to disprove this hypothesis in the case of the 'Watseka

When Lurancy Vennum 'became' Mary Roff, she moved into the Roffs' home (above). The new 'Mary' recognised many of the family possessions. After a few months' stay 'Mary' said goodbye; Lurancy took her place and was welcomed back into the Vennum home (below). The disturbances that had once alarmed her family now virtually ceased

Will the real Mrs Piper...

Mrs Leonora Piper first discovered her exceptional abilities as a medium during her twenties, when she fell into a trance while she was being treated by a psychic healer

One of the most closely studied of American mediums was Mrs Leonora Piper of Boston, Massachusetts. While in her trance state she was ostensibly taken over by one or more psychic 'masters of ceremonies', or 'controls'. Some showed humour, wit and knowledge; others talked arrant nonsense; others seemed to be psychic confidence tricksters.

The psychical researcher Richard Hodgson was at first sceptical of the 'spiritistic hypothesis' to explain these happenings. He was inclined to the opinion of his colleague Mrs Sidgwick that the controls were 'phases or elements' of Mrs Piper's personality. But then a control appeared claiming to be George Pelham.

Pelham had been a friend of Hodgson and had promised that, if he were to die first and find himself still existing, he would devote himself to proving the fact. Two years later he *did* die, in an accident. After several years' study of the 'Pelham' control, Hodgson was finally forced to report: 'Out of a large number of sitters who went as strangers to Mrs Piper, the communicating G.P. has picked out the friends of G.P. living, precisely as the G.P. living might be expected to do . . . I cannot profess to have any doubt but that the chief communicators to whom I have referred . . . are veritably the personalities that they claim to be, that they have survived the change we call death.'

> Wonder', owing to the comparative meagreness of the record and the probable abundance of 'suggestion' in the environment, and any conclusion that we may reach would probably be determined largely by our convictions concerning other cases. My personal opinion is that the 'Watseka Wonder' case belongs in the main manifestations to the spiritistic category.

Hodgson is saying, then, and the present writer must agree with him, that there is no way that the strange case of Lurancy Vennum can be explained away by normal means. It has to be explained in one of two ways – in terms of spirits or of multiple personalities. These two types of explanation can be applied to a large body of psychic phenomena.

The spiritistic hypothesis, namely that in this case the spirit of Mary Roff took over the body of Lurancy Vennum, receives support from a similar case studied by Professor Ian Stevenson of the Department of Neurology and Psychiatry at the University of Virginia, USA. A little Indian boy, Jasbir Lal Jat, $3\frac{1}{2}$ years old, was pronounced dead of smallpox. Some hours later, however, he revived and exhibited a brand new personality. He now claimed to be a man from a different village who had been poisoned. His detailed knowledge of the man's past life convinced the little boy's parents that he was not fantasising. It was found that the man had died at about the same time that the child ostensibly died, suggesting a bizarre spirit analogue of musical chairs.

Professor Ian Stevenson, a leading American authority on cases of apparent reincarnation

This interpretation has to be studied as an alternative to the straightforward reincarnation theory in conjunction with the remarkable collection of ostensible reincarnation cases collected by Dr Stevenson and others. The 'Watseka wonder' and the case of Jasbir Lal Jat demonstrate the necessity of keeping in mind the 'possession' hypothesis.

Hodgson's other theory was that a secondary personality of Lurancy Vennum's utilised extra-sensory perception or paragnostic powers to acquire details of Mary Roff's past life from those still living and then dramatised them into a pseudo Mary Roff personality. This is also capable of fitting the facts of the case. For what reason Lurancy Vennum's subconscious should do this we can only guess. It is clear, however, that the girl was surrounded by people who were sympathetic towards the spiritistic hypothesis: if she was suffering attacks of hysteria, she might well, on the subconscious level, wish to give them what they wanted. To do this, however, she would have had to have psychic powers to gather a multitude of details from the memories of Mary Roff.

Whatever the truth of the matter, it seems certain that Lurancy Vennum, as 'Mary Roff', demonstrated that a human being can suffer psychic 'invasion' for a period measured in months, to the extent that the 'legal tenant' of the body is displaced as if he or she had never been.

Further reading

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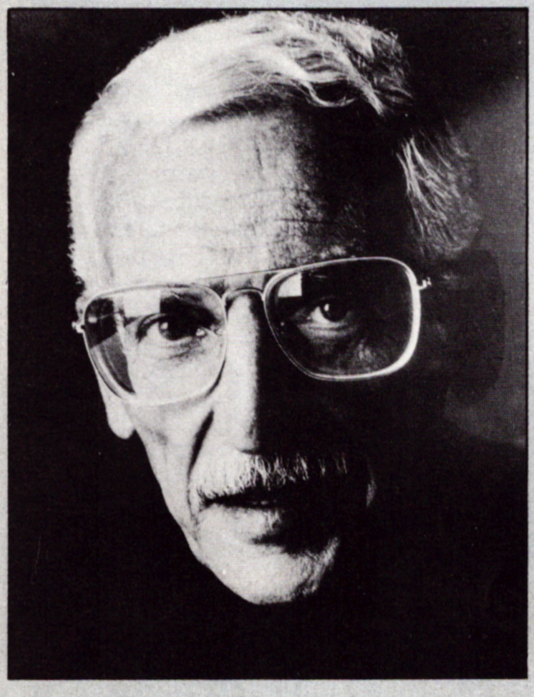
F.W.H. Myers, *Human personality and its survival of bodily death*, Longmans Green 1903

Ian Stevenson, *Twenty cases suggestive of reincarnation*, University of Virginia Press 1974

G.N.M. Tyrrell, *The personality of Man*, Penguin 1947

Amityville unlimited



The sensational saga of the alleged entities that possessed a house in Amityville, New York, seems to have undergone a strange transformation at every retelling, as MELVIN HARRIS discovered

Left: Jay Anson, the author of many film and television scripts. He wrote a dramatic account of the hauntings at 112 Ocean Avenue (below), from information supplied by George and Kathy Lutz, in his best-selling book *The Amityville horror* (1978); in a postscript to the book he said he was convinced the Lutzes were telling the truth

THE SINISTER STORY of a house haunted by malignant forces has chilled many people since it was published in Jay Anson's book *The Amityville horror* in 1978. In the preface to the book it is claimed that the story is 'a documentary told by the family and the priest who actually experienced what is reported'; but it has become increasingly evident to independent investigators that the frightening events related are almost entirely fictitious.

Fortunately for the truth, George and Kathy Lutz, who lived at the 'horror' house at 112 Ocean Avenue between 18 December 1975 and 14 January 1976, have left a trail of revealing evidence behind them that does not agree with the account they later gave to author Jay Anson. In an article published in the *Long Island Press* on 17 January 1976, just a few days after the Lutzes had fled from the house, George sets out his experiences; but his story centres around things that were sensed rather than seen and is completely at odds with later accounts of flying objects, moving couches and wailing noises. The only physical phenomenon he mentions is a

window that opened of its own accord; later investigations showed that the counterweights were too heavy! At that date the Amityville happenings were purely subjective and scarcely worthy of note.

A year later George produced a new version of events, which journalist Paul Hoffman wrote up for the the April 1977 issue of America's *Good Housekeeping* magazine. This interesting text flatly contradicts the earlier account and conflicts with the Anson story as well.

The *Good Housekeeping* account begins with a Roman Catholic priest blessing the house. When he leaves, the priest warns the Lutzes about one of the bedrooms, saying, 'Don't let anyone sleep in there. Keep the door closed. Spend as little time as possible in there.' But this does not tally with the book. There, the priest's alleged advice about not using the room is given one week after the blessing – and following a whole series of nasty events.

The next person to be affected by the house is Kathy Lutz's aunt, described in the *Good Housekeeping* article as a 'normally placid ex-nun'. When she comes to visit, she behaves quite out of character and becomes hostile towards George, who says she 'sat there and cut me down for three hours'. In the book, this incident seems to have been reshaped to make it more dramatic. The aunt can stand being in the house only for a very short while: she simply inspects it, refuses to enter certain rooms, and leaves. In fact she 'hadn't been in the house for more than half an hour when she decided it was time to go'.

A similar re-vamping technique is used on the 'old crone' incident. In *Good Housekeeping* George says that on Saturday, 10 January 1976 he woke at night with 'a compulsion to flee the house'. He yelled at his wife and shook her, but could not wake her. Then, as he watched, his sleeping wife 'turned into a 90-year-old woman'. Her hair became 'old and dirty', she dribbled, and creases and crow's feet appeared on her face; 'it took several hours before she returned to her normal self.'

When this story makes its appearance in Jay Anson's book it has undergone significant changes. First, it is placed some days earlier, on Wednesday, 7 January. George does not wake up wanting to flee the house; on the contrary, he is unable to get to sleep, and in this wide-awake state feels an urge to go out to the local tavern for a beer. When he turns to speak to Kathy, he finds her levitating 'almost a foot [30 centimetres] above him'. He pulls her down onto the bed, where she wakes. And it is then, while awake, that she turns into a 90-year-old woman. In this version, the state lasts only for a minute or two – not several hours.

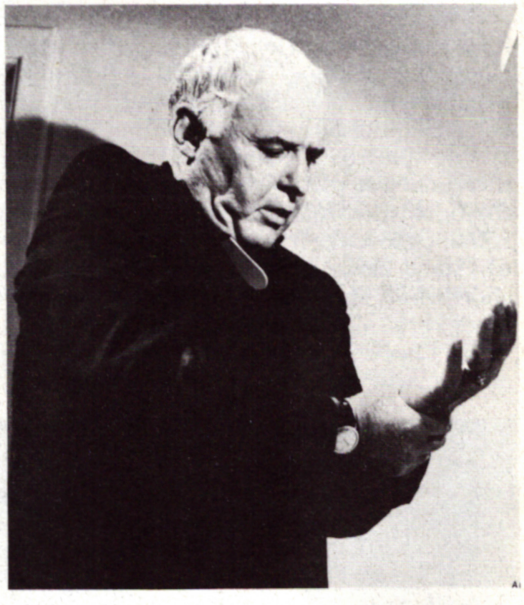
In a scene from the film *The Amityville horror* (1979) George (below), played by James Brolin, is haunted by a vision of killer Ronald DeFeo, with whom he is becoming obsessed. Just before leaving the house for ever, a storm-drenched Kathy (bottom), played by Margot Kidder, returns for the last time to the children's room on the second floor, the scene of some of the most alarming phenomena

As described in the book, this levitation is the second of three. The first took place on 4 January, when Kathy floated 'two feet [60 centimetres] above the bed'. And a further levitation takes place after the Lutzes have left the house, when they are staying with Kathy's mother on 15 January; on this occasion both George and Kathy float around at the same time. Yet nothing was ever said about these remarkable levitations in the *Good Housekeeping* account. The only time levitation is mentioned is when George describes waking on the night of Sunday, 11 January, to find 'Kathy sliding across the bed, as if by levitation' – a very different matter from 'floating in the air'.

The ultimate horror however is the series

of visitations by an entity variously described as a 'gigantic [hooded] figure in white' and a 'demon with horns' with half its face shot away. Yet in *Good Housekeeping* there is not one hint of his visits. There is a passing mention, however, of Kathy seeing 'some eyes at the window', which she described as 'red, beady eyes'. When this story reaches the book, it becomes a point of high drama.

In another scene from the film George (above), hatchet in hand, challenges the demonic forces plaguing the house. After visiting the house to bless it, Father Delaney (right), played in the film by Rod Steiger, discovers that his palms are raw and bleeding



'Two fiery red eyes'

Set in a second-storey bedroom at night, this dramatic episode in the book has the Lutzes' young daughter pointing to a window where George and Kathy see 'two fiery, red eyes. No face, just the mean, little eyes of a pig' looking in. Kathy rushes at the window 'screaming in an unearthly voice'. She smashes the glass with a chair and they hear an 'animal cry of pain, a loud squealing – and the eyes were gone'. The squealing continues for a while outside the house. But George does not go out to look for the flying pig; instead he comforts his wife, who sobs, 'It's been here all the time. I wanted to kill it. I wanted to kill it!'

The story has obviously undergone a remarkable transformation. And similar 'improvements' are apparent throughout the book. Coupled with the findings of independent investigators (see page 2398), this evidence suggests that the whole bizarre tale is a fabrication.

Without a confession from the Lutzes it will probably never be quite clear what started the whole thing off. But it is known that George Lutz was a man with problems. After his first marriage broke up he tried group therapy, then turned to transcendental meditation. Things seemed to improve for a while after his second marriage, but he was facing a crisis even before he moved to Amityville: Kathy's two sons had tried to run away, his business was in difficulties, and he had problems with the tax people. Rather than cutting back on expenditure, George decided to buy a house that was way above his means.

Once the family was settled in the new house, matters fast came to a head. George became apathetic: he didn't wash or shave, and he stopped going to the office. In the book he describes how he lay awake at night, worrying about his difficulties:

> a second marriage with three children, a new house with a big mortgage. The taxes in Amityville were three times higher than in Deer Park. Did he really need that new speedboat? How the hell was he going to pay for all of this? The construction business was lousy on Long Island. . . .

All this worry soon took its toll. George began to blame his inertia, his bad temper and his problems on the house. When he was short with his employees, or when he hit the children, it was the fault of the bad vibrations from the house, not his own lack of control. In this frame of mind he began to identify with the murderer Ronald DeFeo: he became convinced he was Defeo's physical double, recording that when he first saw DeFeo's picture, 'the bearded 24-year-old face staring back . . . could have been his own.'

And if he was the physical double of a psychopath, why not the mental double too? There is little doubt that George felt black, murderous thoughts in the house in Ocean Avenue, but they arose from his own plight and frustrations, not from any paranormal forces.

After leaving Amityville, George became more and more enmeshed in his morbid fantasies, and the situation began to spin out of control. The meeting with Anson offered an opportunity to crystallise his sinister imaginings in profitable form. But to become a best-seller, the story had to pose as fact. As fiction, it is debatable whether the book would even have covered its printing costs.

continued from back cover

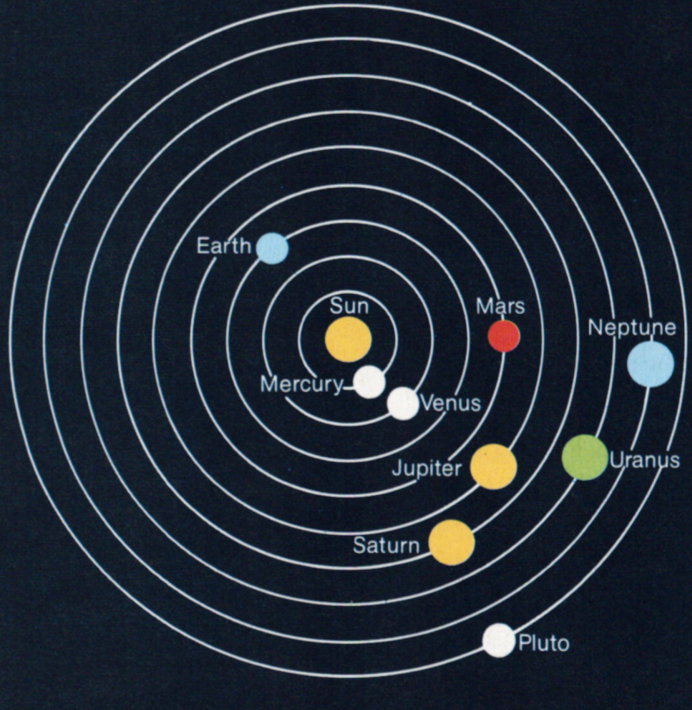
When the synod occurs in summer, however, the Earth experiences a run of warm northern hemisphere summers, periods described in the historical records as times of heat and drought. This discovery has suggested a possible explanation of the phenomenon to the Chinese researchers, although it is still a long way from being proved correct.

Throughout the year the Earth moves at varying speeds according to its distance from the Sun. Ignore this for the moment and just consider the additional fluctuations in speed due to the attraction of the other planets. When the Earth is on one side of the Sun and the other planets are together on the other side, the Earth feels a strong pull from them because of their gravity, and speeds up as it moves around the Sun towards the synod. As it passes through the grouping its speed is at its maximum. The Earth is then held back and slowed down as it moves around to the other side of the Sun. So the half-orbit on the side of the grouping is traversed quickly, and the half-orbit on the other side of the Sun is traversed slowly. In the case of a winter synod, winter gets longer and summer gets shorter. Since it takes years for the slow-moving giant planets to come into near-alignment, and years to move out of it, effects on the Earth's seasons are felt for years preceding and following a synod.

All this might be taken with a pinch of salt by Western scientists, in spite of the historical coincidences, if it were not for one more 'coincidence' that they find even more dramatic. The best record we have of how temperatures have changed in the northern hemisphere over the past 1000 years or so comes from an analysis of a long ice core drilled from the Greenland icecap by Danish scientists. Professor Willi Dansgaard and his team have been able to determine the temperature in Greenland at the time each layer of the glacier was formed by falling snow. The technique depends on subtle measurements of the amounts of oxygen isotopes locked up in the water molecules of the ice; but what matters for the Chinese study is that the temperature record unravelled by the Danes several years previously exactly matches the temperature record from China, with the same cool decades corresponding to planetary synods. This proves that the effect is worldwide, not confined to China, and it is crucially important as an independent 'witness' of the effect.

It remains to be seen how closely the pattern will be repeated in the future, but all the evidence suggests that the responsibility for the failure of Viking colonies in North America 1000 years ago, for the frost fairs on the Thames 300 years ago, and perhaps for the severe winter weather in Europe and North America during the late 1970s and early 1980s, can be laid at the door of the planetary synods. From the effects of past groupings, Ren and Li predict an average cooling of 2.7°F (1.5°C) by the end of the century, compared with the average temperature in the 1950s. It may not sound much, but it would correspond to the worst winter weather in Britain since the little ice age was triggered by the synod of 1665.

The planets on 2 November 1982 (orbits not to scale)



A winter's tale

Will the white Christmas become common once again?

Severe winters to the end of the 20th century – that is the prediction of two Peking scientists, with 3000 years of Chinese weather records to back them up. JOHN GRIBBIN reports on their new theory of a planetary influence on the Earth's weather

The theory of the 'Jupiter effect' – the idea that planetary alignments can trigger earthquakes – attracted intense interest when it was put forward by Stephen Plagemann and myself in 1974. Although it no longer seems plausible (see page 612), two Chinese researchers, intrigued by the original Jupiter effect calculations, have been investigating other links between the planets and the Earth. Using Chinese historical records that go back for 3000 years they have found that, whatever their effect on earthquakes may be, rare planetary groupings like the one that occurred in November 1982 invariably signal the onset of decades of severe winter weather in the northern hemisphere. Their resulting forecast is for 'cold winter and freezing disaster in the next two decades'.

Ren Zhenqiu and Li Zhisen are reputable scientists who hold research posts at the Peking Academy of Meteorological Science and at the Peking Astronomical Observatory. Their study has concentrated on the kind of planetary groupings now colloquially known as Jupiter effect alignments – though they are not, strictly speaking, alignments. These happen, on average, every 179 years, although the interval between groupings can be as short as 140 years, and they can be predicted with absolute precision as the planets follow their own regular orbits around the Sun. It is just as easy to calculate the positions of the planets throughout history, and to pick out the dates of interesting groupings.

In November 1982 we saw a classic example, with the Earth isolated on one side of the Sun and all of the other planets grouped in a small part of the sky, spread over no more than 64° as viewed from Earth. With the aid of the historical records, which go back farther in China than anywhere else in the world, Ren and Li found that *every time* in the past 3000 years that such a grouping – called a 'synod' by the scientists – has occurred during winter it has been followed by a run of severe winters lasting for decades. This includes the famous cold spell at the end of the 17th century, the 'little ice age' when the Thames froze regularly: it followed a synod that occurred in January 1665.

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